

End the War Now

BY DANIEL ELLSBERG



Tom Paine said wars are caused by the pride of kings. In mid-January, two willful men chose war. Each of them—George Bush, Saddam Hussein—preferred and still prefers to risk and sacrifice countless thousands of other people's lives rather than risk his own humiliation, rather than being seen as weak or unmanly, or as backing off from commitments he had foolishly made.

Neither George Bush nor Saddam Hussein is a plausible champion of a New World Order. Each of them is, in his own way, highly representative of a very old world order: 5,000 years of patriarchy, machismo, and militarism.

Yet that this particular war could be so long prepared and launched in a democracy, and be, at least at the outset, so popular, reveals how deeply rooted that old order is in our own society, and how far many Americans—not just George Bush—are from regarding war as truly a last resort.

The majority support for the war reflects in part the early, lingering illusion that it will be short and cheap in human lives, and in part an illogical but ancient reflex that to support the troops in their time of danger must mean to support the President and his decisions.

It could better be argued that American troops deserve more of their families and friends, deserve more of us as American citizens than unquestioning acceptance of the very President and his policies that put those troops unnecessarily at risk.

We could keep our heads down and stay silent for the moment, until a tide of body bags drifting home from a U.S. ground offensive shifts public opinion in our direction. But that would mean to let our silence be counted as assent. It would be to give up all effort, and all hope, to avert those casualties on both sides.

There is a time when silence is a lie; when silence is complicity; when silence is betrayal.

Facing this juggernaut, we cannot know what

effect, if any, we can have on the course of events. But we owe it to our troops and other potential victims of this war, we owe it to our country and to ourselves, to speak the truth: the truth about ourselves, what we believe, what we know in our hearts, what we reject and what we want.

The truth—for me—is that it was wrong to start this war and it is wrong to continue it. We want, we demand, that it be ended, now, *before* a ground war and other escalations take the lives of tens of thousands of American and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi human beings.

The truth is that the continuation and expansion of this war represent a graver danger and a greater evil than do any of the plausible diplomatic agreements that might end it.

Right now—after the foolish hopes of victory through air power have been dispelled, before the mistake of launching the war is compounded by even more fateful errors of ground attack against Iraqi field fortifications or invasion of Iraq—may be just the time when public pressure and new initiatives by U.N. member states could cause real negotiations, at last, to be tried.

If Saddam Hussein refuses to negotiate Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait until after the bloody test of ground combat that he seeks, that is no reason to give him what his strategy demands. A return to economic sanctions and defensive operations in Saudi Arabia would be far preferable to a continued air offensive sure, eventually, to escalate to mutual disaster.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We need the vision to see, in the ordeals of this generation, the opportunity to transfigure ourselves and American society." In this war—so far, popular, chosen by an elected leader, Congressionally authorized—we are forced to see ourselves and American society as in a mirror. And what we see needs profound transfiguration.

Let us take strength from each other to do what must be done to end this war. ■

Daniel Ellsberg has been active in the resistance to the Vietnam war, the nuclear arms race, and the war in the Persian Gulf.